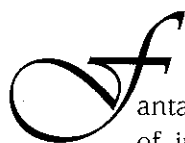


# FANTASY

ISAAC ASIMOV

antasy" is from the Greek *phantasia*, which refers to the faculty of imagination. The word is sometimes spelled "phantasy" in homage<sup>1</sup> to Greek, but I find that foolish. (In fact, I find the Greek *ph* foolish altogether and think it would be delightful if we spoke of "fotografs" and "filosofy," as the Italians do.) A contracted form of "fantasy," with a similar meaning, is "fancy."

In a very broad sense, all fiction (and a great deal of nonfiction) is fantasy, in that it is drawn from the imagination. We in our group,<sup>2</sup> however, give the word a special meaning. It is not the plot of a story that makes it a fantasy, however imaginative that plot might be. It is the background against which the plot is played out that counts.

The plot of *Nicholas Nickleby*,<sup>3</sup> for instance, is entirely imaginative. The characters and events existed entirely in Charles Dickens' imagination but the background is the England of the 1830s exactly as it was. This is "realistic fiction." (We can even use the term where the background is made artificially pretty. Surely, the cowboys of real life must have been pretty dirty and smelly, but you'd never think it to look at Gene Autry or Randolph Scott.)<sup>4</sup>

1 **homage:** tribute; honor

2 **our group:** the editor and editorial directors of *Isaac Asimov Science Fiction Magazine*

3 ***Nicholas Nickleby*:** a realistic novel by Charles Dickens set in England. The novel exposed the cruel conditions of many schools of the period.

4 **Gene Autry ... Randolph Scott:** television and movie actors who played cowboys

If, on the other hand, the background does not describe any actual background as it is (or once was) then we have "imaginative fiction." Science fiction and fantasy are each an example of imaginative fiction.

If the nonexistent background is one that might conceivably exist someday, given appropriate changes in the level of science and technology, or given certain assumptions that do not conflict with science and technology as we know it today, then we have science fiction.

If the nonexistent background cannot ever exist no matter what *reasonable* changes or assumptions we postulate,<sup>5</sup> then it is fantasy.

To give specific examples, the Foundation series is science fiction, and *The Lord of the Rings* is fantasy. To be more general about it, spaceships and robots are science fiction, while elves and magic are fantasy.

But there are all kinds of fantasy. There is "heroic fantasy" in which the characters are larger than life. In this case, the outsize nature of the characters may be so enormous as to verge on the grotesque,<sup>6</sup> as in the case of Superman or the other superheroes; or the characters may be so human in many ways that we find ourselves accepting them as real, as in the case of the elves and hobbits of Tolkien's masterpiece. The so-called "sword and sorcery" tales [are] a subdivision of this.

There is "legendary fantasy," which deliberately mimics the myth-making activities of an earlier age. We can have modern retellings of the Trojan War, or the voyage of the Argonauts, or the saga of the Ring of the Nibelungen, or of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. A marvelous recent example of this last is Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*.

There is "children's fantasy" of which the well-known "fairy tales" are the best example, though these were definitely adult folk tales to begin with. Modern examples can stretch from the inspired madness of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* to the realism of Hugh Lofting's Dr. Dolittle tales (so realistic we almost forget that animals which talk and think in human fashion are actually fantasy).

There is "horror fantasy" in which tales of ghosts and malign<sup>7</sup> beings such as devils and ghouls and monsters are used to thrill and frighten us. The motion pictures are rich in this type, from the inspired greatness of *King Kong* and *Frankenstein* to the good-natured foolishness of *Godzilla*.

5 **postulate**: theorize; guess

6 **grotesque**: ridiculous; abnormal

7 **malign**: evil; malevolent

And there is “satirical fantasy,” such as the marvelous tales of John Collier<sup>8</sup>—and this, frankly, is my favorite type of fantasy.

There may be other types, and numerous subdivisions of each; in fact, you may have a different system of classification altogether. However, the salient facts are that fantasy is a very broad and heterogeneous<sup>9</sup> field of literature, and that every variety can vary in quality from the very good to the very bad.

### WISH FULFILLMENT

It seems to me that most fantasy is born of wish fulfillment, and that should be a strong component in its perennial popularity.

After all, the Universe is *not* what we want it to be and from childhood on we desperately wish that were not so.

8 **John Collier:** twentieth-century American short story writer. See his short story, “The Chaser” in the second cluster of this book.

9 **heterogeneous:** made of dissimilar or diverse ingredients



FERDINAND LURED  
1849  
John Everett Millais

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you were so good-looking that members of the opposite sex would swoon with desire for you? Wouldn't it be great if you were so strong or so skillful at the martial arts that no one would dare cross you, especially that rotten bully down the street? Wouldn't it be marvelous if you could fly by just flapping your hands slightly, or could be invisible if you wanted to be, or could have anything you wanted just by snapping your fingers? Go ahead, make up your own list.

It's not only fantasy that feeds your desires. Modern advertisement offers you wish fulfillment in huge quantities and makes millions as a result. Let a woman but use a particular brand of toothpaste and that handsome fellow, who had earlier been indifferent, becomes instantly enamored. Just place a drop of this ointment on your skin and eternal youth is yours. . . .

Popular songs tell you that wishing will make it so.

You might think that all this is just food for the childish in us, but there are people who find support for wish fulfillment in science, too. "What man can imagine," they intone<sup>10</sup> solemnly, "man can do." And the history of technology offers us many examples.

It has been a millennia-long dream of humanity to fly, and look here—we can fly. We can fly faster and longer than birds. We have built contraptions that can carry hundreds of people through the stratosphere at supersonic speeds. How's that for wish fulfillment?

And we have television, and electric lighting at the touch of a button, and elevators to take us to the top of a tall building, and automobiles that are more convenient than any set of seven-league boots,<sup>11</sup> and anesthetics<sup>12</sup> that do away with pain, and magic potions called "antibiotics" that cure disease, and so on, and so on, and so on. Ask any primitive storyteller to imagine a wish and it is very likely we can point to something in modern technology that would correspond.

Just the same, while science is important as a device that can guide the way to astonishing things made possible, it is even more important as a way of setting *limits*. It marks the impossible.

Sure you can fly by taking advantage of the laws of aerodynamics and by expending sufficient energy, but that's not the way *I* want to fly. *I* want to fly by having my body lift into the air, and move this way and

<sup>10</sup> **intone**: say; pronounce

<sup>11</sup> **seven-league boots**: magical footwear enabling the wearer to take strides of seven leagues (twenty-one miles)

<sup>12</sup> **anesthetics**: painkillers

that, quickly or slowly, *without any expenditure of energy on my part*. I want effortless flying without machinery. I can imagine that without any trouble, but I can't do it, and I suspect it will be forever impossible for anyone to do it. The implacability<sup>13</sup> of the law of conservation of energy and the unlikelihood of being able to monkey with the gravitational interaction stand in the way.

What started me thinking in this direction was the premiere of the "Twilight Zone" series on television. It opened with two half-hour dramas. The first was a dramatic version of Harlan Ellison's "Shatterday."

The second, however, is what I want to talk about. It was called *A Little Peace and Quiet* and dealt with a nice woman who had four totally impossible and noisy children, a thickheaded, noisy husband, and a noisy dog. Unfortunately, she found it impossible to impose any sort of order on them. My own idea, as I watched, was a simple and direct one. Kill them all.

However, our heroine found a locket in a box in her backyard. She put it on and then, when driven to distraction by her horrible family, she screamed, "Shut up. Just shut up," and they were all quiet. In fact, they were more than quiet; they all froze. Everything froze, and it became quite apparent that the woman's locket was a device that, at will, could stop time.

Nor was it a local phenomenon, for as the drama proceeded, and she had other opportunities to make use of her new ability, it became perfectly clear that it stopped time for the whole Earth and, very likely, for the whole Universe.

What's more, she could start it again any time by saying, "Start talking."

That amounted to several wish fulfillments at once. She was, of course, invisible to anyone else while time was stopped. She could do anything she wanted, such as lifting something out of another woman's shopping cart, or taking liberties with a very handsome young man who was frozen and helpless. (She didn't, but it was made perfectly clear that she had the impulse to.)

As fantasy, it was fascinating. As science, alas, it was impossible.

But don't get me wrong. I'm not a spoilsport. I enjoyed the drama, and though I might have muttered to my dear wife, Janet, "All this is impossible," I didn't let that interfere with my enjoyment. It's just important not to mistake fantasy for science, that's all. ♪

<sup>13</sup> implacability: rigidity; unchanging nature